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**Keen to get married: Why  
marriage is so important to  
'independent' female migrant  
workers in Shenzhen, China**

**I-Chieh Fang**

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## Foreword

This paper, “Keen to get married: Why is marriage so important to “independent” female migrant workers in Shenzhen, China” is presented by Dr. I-Chieh Fang to the Fourth Sino-Nordic Gender and Women’s Studies Conference held at Aalborg University, October 25-27, 2011. The conference was titled: Travelling Theories within the Context of Globalisation, Transnational Feminism and Knowledge Production, and it was hosted by the Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University and the Confucius Institute, Aalborg Denmark.

I-Chieh Fang is a Ph.D in Social Anthropology at London School of Economics, UK. She has written a Ph.D dissertation on new generation migrant workers in China and published several articles on marriage and other cultural aspects of various migrant communities.

There were six different workshops during the conference. This paper was one of the six presentations presented and discussed under the second workshop titled, “Women’s empowerment in urban and rural areas”. Among the six papers, two deal with social security and welfare issues pertaining to China’s “floating population”, two dwell on love marriage and spouse-choosing criteria, one studies the remaking of Middle Class Families in China, one on patriarchy in India and one on women’s voice in the Arab Spring.

FREIA, the Feminist and Gender Research Centre in Aalborg, is delighted to present Dr. I-Chieh Fang’s study to the scholarly community in Denmark through this paper series. We hope that the paper will be of great interest to a wide range of research fields, such as China studies, gender studies, migrant studies and cultural studies, and that it will serve as a source of inspiration for further scholarly discussion and dialogue in or cross these fields.

On behalf of FREIA

Qi Wang

Workshop leader

Assistant Professor, Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University

# **Keen to get married: Why marriage is so important to 'independent' female migrant workers in Shenzhen, China**

I-Chieh Fang

London School of Economics

This article focuses on young female rural-to urban migrant workers and their attitudes towards marriage. For many of the female migrant workers I met during the fieldwork which I performed in 2007-8 in Shenzhen as part of my study on “Growing up and becoming independent: an ethnographic study of new generation migrant workers in China”, it seemed that the most attractive aspect of migration was the opportunity to meet young men and subsequently marry a person of their own choice.

During the period of migration, young female migrant workers are far away from home and hence away from the influence of their parents upon their personal lives. Partner-seeking, and subsequently marriage, have a great extent become individual projects in which young migrant women “act on their own”. On the other hand, however, these young women must curtail their individuality and obey the socially constructed standard of what a desirable wife should be in order to secure a marriage. This paper argues that while the ‘freedom’ to choose spouse has undermined the Chinese institution of arranged marriages and parental power, young migrant women are arguably controlled more than ever by traditional gender ideologies.

## **Keen to get married**

The young female workers at THS spent much of their leisure time talking to their friends on their mobile phones.<sup>1</sup> The most popular topic of conversation is

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<sup>1</sup> THS is an electronic factory in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone.

‘how to find a good match’ and the progress in doing so. For these women, to ‘find a good match’ (*zhaoge haoduixiang*) is something different from flirting – or having a casual relationship. A *duixiang* is someone a young woman could seriously see as a potential marriage partner. When such a person is found, the woman hands out candies, known as ‘relationship sweets’, to the co-workers in the factory, and the “couple” may invite some close friends from both sides to eat in a restaurant. This ritual-like start to a relationship reflects the fact that both sides are serious about the relationship. To *wanwan eryi* (‘just fool around’ or ‘just have a casual relationship’) is, by contrast, generally considered inappropriate – even though the women sometimes do engage in it.

A number of researchers have commented on the prevalence of talk about relationships and romance inside Chinese factories. Pun, for example, describes the jokes and laughter surrounding the topics of love and sex. Citing Paul Willis, she argues that this helps workers to cope with the difficulties and tedium of factory life – ‘having a laff’ is a way to defeat boredom and fear. Therefore, Pun interprets this love-related talk as a ‘weapon of [the] weak’ in their battle against work alienation (Pun 2005: 154-157). In my experience, however, gossip and romance talking are not just ways of coping with or resistance to a dull work environment, these are indeed matters of ultimately importance to them. They feel that they can fail in work but they cannot afford to fail in marriage. As they put it, ‘Marriage is a woman’s biggest enterprise [*hunyin shi nuren zuida de shiye*]’. So how is this enterprise pursued?

### **Romantic love, individualization and capitalism**

The rise of romantic love is related to the economic development of a society and romantic love is fostered by modernity, capitalism and individualism (Macfarlane 1987). In traditional peasant societies, marriage is ‘largely based on arrangement by kin or other wider groups’ (Macfarlane 1987: 124). Today, however, in the era of economic openness, Chinese people, even peasants, are now able to enjoy individual freedom, conjugal privacy and romantic love (Yan 2003). However, anthropological studies have demonstrated that romantic love, when it appears as an ideal marriage form in different cultural contexts, is not always an emancipating ideology (Parry 2001). And empirical research on China also suggests that the rise of romantic love put new generation of migrant workers under huge pressure, for to arrange their own marriages is often very difficult to achieve (Zhou & Hou 2010).

Since the ‘romantic revolution’ in post-Mao China, being *fengliu* (‘handsome, pretty, clean, well dressed, familiarity with make-up, socializing and conversation’) has replaced being *laoshi* (‘honest, decent’) as the crucial requirements for the ideal mate for young peasants (Yan 2003: 76-79). Yan suggests that, in pursuing these new criteria, the new generation of young rural people has moved away from the collective economic goals of the family, in particular in placing more stress on the importance of intimacy in the conjugal relationship. However, scrutinizing all these criteria, they seem to a large extent to echo the lifestyle and image of the urban middle class. From this perspective, the ‘romantic revolution’ in rural China reflects class differences. When adopted by young peasants, it arguably relates to their more general yearning to emulate the modern lifestyle of the urban middle class, i.e. their wish to be the desiring and consuming subjects of modernity (Andrews & Shen 2002, Rofel 2007, Yu & Pan 2008).

The other negative side of the emphasis on romantic love is that it helps naturalize particular ideas about gender roles. Women in particular are expected to provide considerable emotional labour:

It is the combination of women’s economic dependence on men and ideologies about the importance of love in making a relationship successful that has pushed women to specialise in the work of love. Relationships forged by choice, pleasure, and psychological intimacy may be less durable than marriages based on and maintained through economic ties between families, and so it follows that developing an expertise in emotion and pleasure of others is a critical skill that women need in order to help these fragile relationships survive. (Wardlow & Hirsch 2006: 25)

When romantic love stresses individual “free choice”, it naturally gives men, the power holders in the existing structure, more to say than women. In this structure, women submit to men’s wills and preferences in order to win their consent to stay in a relationship. Romantic love promotes a particular kind of femininity, based largely on men’s perspectives and masculine consumerism. It also arguably hinders women from sensing gender inequality – in the name of love – and thus weakens female worker’s class consciousness (Weinstein, 2006: 162- 163).

## **Sexual relationships and virginity**

As marriage is the ultimate reason to start a relationship, a young woman is only serious about her relationship to a boy who is seriously considering marrying her. When a female migrant worker starts seeing such a potential husband-to-be, the couple will rent a room outside the factory and begin to live together. Sexual relationship and pregnancy is often the immediate “fruit” of their co-habiting. When pregnant, a girl will quit her job, and the people around her tend to assume that she will soon marry the man who made her pregnant and ‘upgrade’ her status to a wife and a mother. Therefore, the pregnant woman will proudly announce her pregnancy and the pregnancy will be celebrated by her co-workers. For example, when *Jade* quit her job because she was pregnant and went around to say goodbye to each section, the leader of the factory asked her, ‘*Jade*, why are you quitting?’ She smiled and answered, ‘I got promoted.’ *Delicate* said, ‘She has been promoted to be a mother.’ In this sense, losing virginity before marriage is no longer considered immoral (Pun 2005: 156, Yan 2003), as long as the relationship leads to a marriage .

However, virginity is still a concern. Most young women certainly do not, in my experience, want to lose it to a young man who has no intention to marry them. In case a young woman gets pregnant and her boyfriend does not want to marry her (which is rare) the pregnancy will be kept a secret. The girl will keep a low profile and move quietly to another place so that no one gets to know the secret.

## **Being beautiful and desirable**

In the factory environment where young men and women work together female migrant workers are very much aware of their looks. They also seem to enjoy receiving the care and attention from their male fellow workers. In the factory, the employees all wear a uniform: a blue shirt in summer and a blue jacket in winter. However, before going to the shop floor, the young women usually crowd into the toilet to look at themselves in the only two big mirrors in the THS factory. They style their hair by hand and then put on their hats. They adjust their hats to a particular angle and then check their image carefully. When the THS factory moved to a new location, there were no mirrors in the female toilet. Young women used the water fountain (which had a reflective surface) in front of the toilet as their mirror.

For many, the experience of being watched and liked is relatively new and thrilling. Many of these girls grew up as ‘children left behind’ in the

countryside (as *liushou ertong*), i.e. with one or both parents migrating for work, with the result that they did not receive much care and attention during childhood. Silk is considered to be a beautiful young woman – therefore many young men were interested in her. But she told me that she is not in a hurry to choose any one because she grew up as a ‘child left behind’ and therefore actually enjoys being the focus of young men’s attention and care.

In Shenzhen, female migrant workers gradually come to realize that beauty and youth can be exchanged for attention, for money, and even for a ‘good life’. They learned this from both other’s stories and their own experience. Silk first realized that beauty can be a kind of capital for a young woman when she was 14 years old and was working in a factory in suburban Shanghai. One day, a male supervisor from the Quality Control section came down to the shop floor, ordering all the female workers to stand in a row. He then examined them up and down carefully one by one and picked out a few to work with him in the Quality Control office. Silk was one of them but her friend was not. She told me shyly that these young women were picked up because they were more beautiful than the others. After she moved to work in the Quality Control section, her work became lighter and salary higher.

In her home town, she told me, the neighbouring family had two daughters. One year when Silk came home, the elder one of the neighbour’s two daughters had married a Taiwanese man and moved to Taiwan. Her parents had visited Taiwan a few months ago, and they were apparently proud of their daughter and happy about the marriage. The villagers envied the girl’s good luck and the family’s good fortune as well, for marrying a Taiwan person was considered as both privileged and lucrative. Silk told me, ‘A marriage can change a young woman’s life.’ That is what she had learnt from these stories.

Stories like these provoke some young women to be ambitious. In hoping for a secured life and better future, young women are effectively gambling their beauty on a man. I was told several times that some working girls in the factory went to knock on the door of the Taiwanese leader’s room at night, wearing basically nothing. They are willing to offer their bodies in return for some privileges and perhaps an intimate relationship in the direction of marriage.

### **The virtues of being married**

Under the feudal patriarchal system in China, the highest social status a woman can achieve is to become a mother to a son. If women in late imperial China occupied a ‘kin-inflected category’ (Barlow 2004) where they were ‘always

defined in terms of their roles vis-à-vis fathers, husbands, and sons' (Yang 1999: 39), female migrant workers today are no longer being attached to their fathers and sons but they still will be defined in relation to their husbands. Marriage, it seems, is still the most crucial indicator of a woman's adulthood.

Because getting married is understood as a natural completion of a woman's adulthood, single status beyond the usual marriageable age range will be judged as a serious shortcoming. On the factory floor, women have plenty chances to compare themselves to one another. In their words, *Meijiehun, renjia huishuo shibushi you shenme wenti* ('If someone doesn't get married, people will say he/she probably has some problems'). Married women gossip aggressively about the unmarried, especially the "old" ones, and the gossiping does not take into account any career performance. No matter how well an unmarried woman performs in her job or how high the job position she attains, she will still be singled out for her embarrassing unmarried status. In other words, she has simply 'failed' to marry.

In gossip about marriage, married women like Sky seem to have the authority to speak out on questions related to other's private lives. Married women are seldom challenged by others when they express their opinions on family, children, birth or relationships. For example, one day Needle and Jasmine, two married women, gossiped bluntly about the breast size of each young woman in the factory, about some sex scandals and some women's choice of partner relations. While listening to this, Zhangsan, a 21-year-old unmarried young woman, smiled with embarrassment and asked, 'How can you talk about such things?' They replied loudly, 'It's no big deal [*yousheme guanxi*], both of us are already married!' Also married women like to lecture unmarried young women, often ending by saying 'now I have told you. Later on you'll see how it is [*ni yihou iu zhidaole*].'

### **The ethics of femininity**

However, to get married in China today is not only about finding a life partner. For some of the young women I met in the factory, the point of getting married is 'avoiding having to work hard' and 'being provided for life by a man'. Although they are all working hard to earn a living at the moment, they do not regard career success the ultimate goal of their life. To quote them: 'Women don't need to be that hard working. They deserve a man to take care of them.' Delicate told me: 'If my husband can earn enough money, I will be willing to let him pay everything for me. Why shouldn't I enjoy his offer? Why bother to

work that hard? [*Wo name xinku ganma?*].’ To them, a woman’s ideal life (*haoming*) must include a husband who is able, and also willing, to provide for her and make her life comfortable.

It is widely believed among female migrant workers that women have special values/attributes as women, and it is these values/attributes that attract men and make a woman valued in marriage. A woman’s attractiveness is then often measured from the social status of her husband: the richer the man, the more desirable the woman. On the factory floor, married women ‘compete’ with each other over the degree of their womanly virtue by using their husbands as a reflective measure. Criterion such as profession, job title, salary, family background, appearance and the husband’s willingness to indulge his wife are all counted as an indicator of their claimed success. Because people judge a woman’s female virtue by her husband’s social status, finding a rich and spoiling husband became the only way for a migrant girl to prove her virtue and value as a woman.

Before getting married, young women are constantly exposed to moral judgement, either from their parents or from other adults in their life. They were cautioned against doing basically anything a good girl should *not* do – for if they do they will put themselves under the risk of remaining single: no man will want to marry them (*ni name... yihou jiabuchiqu*). In Pun’s ethnography, she describes how the female workers are often reminded of their femaleness. ‘As a girl in the process of becoming a woman, one should behave as the culture require[s]: submissive, obedient, industrious, tender, and so on.’ Otherwise, the risk is that ‘you can’t get married’ (Pun 2005: 143–4).

But what is a woman’s womanly virtue? Sometimes descriptions of women’s virtue (also behaviour) came under the term “femininity”, and the Chinese word *jiao* can serve as a footnote for this much celebrated femininity. *Jiao* in Chinese means ‘delicate’ or ‘pampered’ and can also mean ‘to act in a spoiled, pettishly charming manner’ – something generally considered desirable for a young woman. Therefore, even though female migrant workers are capable of being tough and independent in their working life, they do not want to be a tough and independent person or be regarded as such in their personal life. For such an image will be detrimental to their carefully carved out gender reputation. For example, in Pun’s ethnography, she describes how female supervisors were often ‘taken as men’ because of their role as supervisors (Pun 2005: 145). Thus, female migrant workers have learned to “pack up” or “disguise” their sharpness, toughness, power and ambition in social interaction with the other

sex. They know how to put up an air of obedience and sweetness in order to signify that they are “*jiao*” enough to deserve care and help.

Marriage anxiety, or the fear for being perceived as undesirable, should be understood from the point that a single woman over marriageable age occupies an awkward and ambivalent position in Chinese society. Since she failed to transform herself from the category of ‘young girl’ (*nulai*) to that of ‘woman’ (*funu*), she will be excluded from both categories. Consequently, and because of her vague status, her rights, obligations and social relations are also ill defined in the cultural scheme. As Yang notes, these ‘women without a man’ also tend to be neglected and invisible in the ‘state feminism discourse’ in China (Yang 1999). They are not accorded with a clear membership to the recognized status as ‘women’ (*funu*), nor are they able to enjoy the rights and obligations which society assigns to ‘women’ (*funu*) as a whole. This vague and uncertain future is what most female migrant workers try to avoid. The best way to avoid it is to get married and get married on time.

### **Being independent**

It seems contradictory that female migrant workers claim that their motivation for leaving home was mainly to seek personal ‘independence’ (*duli*) and ‘development’ (*chengzhang*), while at the same time they spend a good deal of their time seeking the perfect match. If they really want to be independent, why are they so keen to marry and why do they invest so much hope for a good and decent life in their boyfriend or husband?

When young women talk about the criteria for a good match it seems clear that they were not only talking about the man as a person but also about his career and family background. They tend to think that their ideal life in the future is something which can be fulfilled by their husband. So whom they marry will to a large extent determine whether their dream for an affluent life will be realised or not. Fond-String wanted to find: ‘a man who is older than me and owns his own business. If he has a shop, that would be great. Like my cousin’s. Her husband owns a stationery shop in Shenzhen. I like this kind of man. I want to find a man with his own enterprise [*wo xiangzhao yige youshiyede nanren*].’

She also hopes the man she marries is mature and knows how to take care of her. Maturity is not necessarily the result of education. Fond-String explained: ‘If he doesn’t have a good educational background, it wouldn’t matter. I don’t pay a lot of attention to that criterion. It would be good enough if he graduated from senior high school. But if he had only graduated from junior high school,

he had better have done *dagong* [worked for a boss] in the city for several years. The experience would have made him more mature.’

Personality is a concern too. She wants him to have a sense of humour and a mild temper so that he will treat her tenderly and make her happy. She does not care so much about how he looks like but he must have a decent family background. If he comes from a poor, rural family, she would eliminate him from the candidate list, for she has no interest to live together with his poor family in a remote mountain area after marriage.

Through these criteria for a good match, a young migrant worker is building up her hopes for a future life. And to ensure the future comes true, she has to do whatever it takes to reduce the risk of being perceived as undesirable and act actively to find a perfect match. A life on their own without being bound to a man is not an option for these young migrant women and it will never be.

In order to understand this seeming contradiction it is useful to return to the concept of “independence”. In a collectivist society like China, to be ‘*duli*’ (independent) has a very different meaning from being independent in an individualistic society like the UK or the USA. A collectivist society does not appreciate independence and autonomy for its own sake. To stay single violates both the ideal of the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other and the society’s emphasis on attending to others, fitting in, and having a harmonious interdependence with them (Markus & Kitayama 1991). In such a collectivist society, the house and family in it are aligned in a ‘a political and moral continuum with community and state’ (Bray 1997). Putting this a slightly different way, it has been suggested that Chinese families are traditionally like enterprises and thus emphasized ‘order and efficiency’ rather than privacy and separateness (Fei 1992, Yan 2003: 108,136). However, as Yan argues, after the 1990s ‘the rise of the private family’ has become an ideal (2003: 218–23). This means, first, that ‘conjugal independence [from wider kin networks] had become an accepted feature of family ideology’ for many people. With the traditional parent-son relationship collapsing, the ‘conjugal tie has become the central axis in the family relationship’ (Yan 2003: 109). Second, changes to living arrangements have been accompanied by a greater stress on privacy and private life (Yan 2003: 112–39). The net effect is that there is more emphasis on the importance of ‘family harmony’ and wives having a greater say in family affairs (Yan 2003: 98–102); overall there is more equality in gender relationships (Yan 2003: 210–12). Living in the era of ‘the rise of the private family’, getting married and forming a separate family offers Chinese people,

especially women, a kind of moral refuge. If they remain single women, they will be judged in various ways: ‘No one wants to marry you because you’re not good enough’, ‘if you keep behaving like this, you won’t be able to get married’ etc – as I have explained above. After getting married, women are kind of shield from this kind of moral judgement.

Although to be independent (*duli*) is supposedly their main goal by embarking on the journey of migration, young female workers are not ashamed to be dependent on men. For them, being independent does not necessarily mean being self-supporting and certainly not staying single. In fact, the kind of “independence” they have in mind is ‘to find a perfect match’, get married and in this way they are (both) socially recognized to ‘be independent from their parents’ families’. If a woman cannot get married, she has to remain in her natal family and can never be independent from it. That is considered as a shame. For young migrant women, the *duli* (independence) they long for is the ‘conjugal independence’ (to use Yan’s words) rather than ‘individual independence’ as in the Western concept.

Time is limited for female migrant workers, they say. First, their marriageable age range is limited. Fond-String is only 23 years old but she told me, ‘I am old. I feel I am really old.’ This is primarily because her age, 23, is on the edge of what many people consider a marriageable age. Meanwhile Art, a 26-year-old unmarried woman, is regarded as *daling* (‘old-aged’). She was told by her male subordinate Peace that, ‘people under your age have time to pick and choose a perfect match. At your age, you cannot afford to wait any longer. Anyone should be OK for you to marry.’

Secondly, the period they will stay in the big city is also limited. The city in which these young people work as migrant labourers is likely to be a short stop rather than a destination. Eventually, they will all leave the city and go back to their hometown. So the period during which they stay in the city is the time during which they have the best opportunity to mingle with the other sex and eventually and hopefully find their perfect match. And if they are lucky enough, they will find a good man to marry and the marriage can change their life completely overnight.

## Conclusion

Today, female migrant workers are bound up in the ‘romantic revolution’ happening in the context of China’s ‘economic openness’. However, it seems that the more they understand what a marriage can do for their life, the more motivated they become to seek a good marriage through gender-appropriate behaviour. Very often, these young women devote much energy to fit themselves into the image of an ideal female spouse. And once they succeed in securing a marriage of their own choice, they will not only gain the exclusive rights and freedoms that are not available for single women but they will also be spared for the moral judgement they often received in their single life. Although gender inequality still exists in the marriage institution, the ‘joyful feeling (or say, ideology) of free choice’ makes this opaque.

Women in this situation do not show solidarity with each other and even tend to turn against each other. To stay single is judged by others as an immature choice, also as a lack of femininity. Unless they marry, young female migrant workers will never be able to transform their social status to that of an adult woman; nor will they fit into the corresponding (new) moral role – and social status – associated with the rise of romantic love. In short, a female migrant worker’s rights, responsibilities and identity are still heavily influenced by her marital status. Much will depend upon the ‘quality’ of her husband, which in turn reflects the degree of her value as a woman. Even though the new courtship and marriage practices allow women to renegotiate their gender identities (Lee 1998: 130), thus arguably making them increasingly powerful (Yan 2003), the bargaining power of young migrant women is inevitably limited and often compromised due to their urgent need to marry and marry well.

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